

United States Committee on Indian Affairs
Testimony

“Examining the True Costs of Alcohol and Drug Abuse in Native Communities”

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Tous' Neneenino Nii'eihii Honobetouu. Thank you to Chairman Barrasso and committee members for inviting me to testify on this important subject. I come to you from one of the most beautiful places in the world, the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. My community is rich in culture and tradition. We are blessed as our youth shine with promise and potential.

And we are struggling. We suffer high rates of alcohol and drug abuse as well as unemployment and poverty. Our beautiful community has been classified as "notorious", "deadly" and "renowned for brutal crime" in the media. We directly see and feel the costs of alcohol and drug abuse on our community.

Many times when we think about the costs of alcohol and drug abuse we focus on the financial costs. We consider how much money we are spending on the justice system including law enforcement, courts and corrections. On Wind River over ninety percent 90% of the crime is drug and alcohol related. There are also the costs on victims of crime, property destruction and theft. In 2014 a victim incurred over \$500,000 dollars of medical costs in one single incident.

Medical costs related to alcohol and drug abuse deplete already limited resources in our community. On Wind River those high cost patients that abuse alcohol and tobacco outnumber patients who do not use, 116 to 5. High cost patients are those who incur more than \$100,000 of expenses in a year.

Employers loose thousands of dollars a year due to high turnover rates in our community. There is an increase in the rate of illness and job abandonment due to alcohol and drugs.

If a person is willing to get help, the cost of treatment services include the average stay in inpatient at \$450 per day. For a stay of ninety days for one person is over \$40,000. In 2014 at the White Buffalo Recovery program in Arapaho, we served over 100 individuals that were in need of this level of care. The cost is four million dollars to accommodate this need. This is not considering the cost of transportation to and from the closest inpatient facility which is 264 miles from our community. Families that would like to participate and support an individual must travel these distances also. Many of these individuals have always lived on the reservation in which they are a majority. We place them in the facilities where they are subject to a minority experience for months. Facilities are limited in knowledge and

understanding of Native culture and tradition. And treatment is a difficult process. We expect someone to change their life in a matter of months.

Alcohol and drug abuse is not limited to the person. Children, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles suffer the costs of their family member's abuse. It is overwhelming to watch a family member destroy their life with alcohol and drugs. This can lead to family members feeling anxiety, fear, anger, concern, embarrassment and guilt or shame. Due to the correlation with violence many families are subject to trauma from witnessing violence or being subject to physical or sexual abuse. This adds pressure to the limited resources for mental health services and social services.

One of the most devastating costs is the human cost. The loss of life which can never be included in an additional line item on next year's budget. No amount of funding can replace this cost. On Wind River 76% of unnatural deaths such as accidents, suicide and homicide are alcohol and drug related. Alcohol and drug use increase the odds of death 16.9 times and equal 42.3 years of life lost in our community.

Cancer, Heart Disease, Cirrhosis and Diabetes are also major causes of death to the tribal population in Wyoming and are directly related to or contributed to by substance abuse. Individuals that use alcohol are more likely to die at 35 to 39 years of age on Wind River. Based on mortality rates in our close knit community we lose a life nearly every week of the year.

The loss of life contributes to more trauma on our families and community. The loss of a tribal member is also a cost of our language and culture, our traditions and our future. It's disheartening to think of all the costs to our way of life, especially because it is preventable.